

This presentation is going to assess the themes of purity and personal experience as they allude to the Biblical cultures employed in early modern Seventeenth-century England, I will be analysing John Milton's poems, Psalms VI and Sonnet 23.

Historian Christopher Hill stated that the Bible in seventeenth-century England, played a significant role in shaping English nationalism; and was essentially the cornerstone of everything that is English culture.¹ It, the Bible, was more than just a religious text.

In the Bible, most Psalms were written by David and through these Psalms, we are acquainted with his close relationship with God. Psalms VI is a lyric poem informed by the writer's personal experience that examines how a believer's relationships with God and other people are affected by the larger world. The poem went through various stages, in which Milton's relationships with God and his enemies changed. In the first part of the psalm, he is extremely sorrowful and asks God for forgiveness and not to punish him, for he is weak and has been suffering for so long. It can be conjectured that Milton's current state of blindness and having suffered the loss of his wives is punishment enough. In line 14, 'Through grief consumes, is waxen old and dark', the word 'dark' symbolizes Milton's blindness. He is overwhelmed with the loss of his sight and consequently his political dreams.

In line 15, the psalm focuses on the relationship between Milton and others; in this case, his enemies were the royalists; being that there were Royalists, once the monarchy was restored, who thought that King Charles I's execution was the worst kind of sin. And Milton had also written articles supporting the King's execution. The relationship between Milton and God changes from an absent God to an ever-present God who hears and answers prayers. He wishes for God to take revenge on his enemies for him, as it was a customary act of God in the Old Testament.

In the poem, Milton sought solace in writing to the 'Lord' a highly common thing to do during that era. Personal experience was portrayed here in the sense that during his penitence, he had faith (just as the scriptures in the Bible instruct) that the 'Lord' will let no harm come to him.

The theme of purity in the poem 'Psalm VI' can be explored in terms of the losses that Milton experienced. The loss of Milton's eyesight, in a sense, creates the idea of him being pure. Without his sight, he is no longer exposed to the corruption of politics; therefore, his political innocence is portrayed here since he ultimately never got to pursue his political dreams. His blindness in its own way protected Milton's purity or innocence from the things that were to come. Some might argue that his innocence was lost because of his blindness. Milton spent his last years alone, in a cold dark world, lost to the hopes of seeing the reformation of the church.

Although purity did not play much of a role in its allusion to biblical practices in the poem 'Psalm VI', it is surely evident throughout the poem 'Sonnet 23'. In line 1 of 'Sonnet 23', "Me thought I saw my late espouse Saint", Milton opens with him seeing one of his late wives during a dream. Personal experience is portrayed in this first line as Milton did indeed lose not one but two wives at the cost of childbirth - Mary Powell in 1652 and Katherine Woodcock in 1656. The poem illustrates the loss he feels for his wife, who was brought back to him in a dream. However, for the first three quatrains, he thought she was real, and the only way he would be able to see his dead wife again is if he was dead. The Bible indoctrinates that one can ultimately get to Heaven if he or she was purified. So, Milton and

his wife could only be in Heaven if they were redeemed and worthy. This is shown in line 8, “Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint”.

In addition, this is associated with the Old Testament where women who gave birth had to be purified. This goes to show that these Biblical cultures continued into early modern seventeenth-century England. “Purification in the old law did save”, in line 6. Speculations would have it that Katherine was the wife he was referring to, being that she died two years after giving birth, so she had ample time to be made pure.

Lines 10 and 14, “...my fancied sight” and “...day brought back my night” are two instances where Milton made mentions his eyesight or lack thereof. He suggests that he had recovered his eyesight and was able to see his wife in heaven dressed in ‘white’ and “vail’d”, only to lose it again when he wakes from his dream. If you look at it from a certain standpoint, Milton experienced losing his wife and his eyesight for a second time. The words “white” and “vail’d” convey a sense of purity, cleanliness, or something untainted. In the Bible, angels are deemed pure and often dressed in white, and historically, the wedding veil symbolizes purity in many religions.

Milton’s use of purity and personal experience as they allude to Biblical cultures, found mostly in the Old Testament, is due to his religious background and the period in which the poem was written. ‘A time before the separation of church and parliament, a time where only the king made all the decisions both religiously and politically’